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Planned Policy or Primitive Balkanism?


A Local Contribution to the Ethnography of the War in Bosnia-Herzegovina

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ABSTRACT *There is a tendency among social scientists and others to interpret the recent war and the related 'ethnic cleansing' in Bosnia-Herzegovina in terms of a political policy carefully orchestrated from above and systematically carried out. Whatever eruptions of (war) violence might deviate from this interpretation are generally viewed as primitive Balkanism, pointless acts, banditism or mental aberrations. Adopting a long-term historical perspective, this article describes a violence process whose final result can be seen as the ethnic homogenization of a local community, but its dynamics cannot directly be attributed to a policy implemented from above. Rather its course can largely be traced back to clan vendettas and local faction fighting in the context of an emerging pilgrimage regime. The case illustrates that a systematic study 'from below' is crucial to a better understanding of the dynamics and the developmental logic of the processes of 'ethnic cleansing' in this part of ex-Yugoslavia.*

KEYWORDS *Bosnia-Herzegovina, war, violence, ethnic cleansing*

 In the early morning of 27 May 1992, Ljerka Šivrić saw something horrible in the neighbouring yard of her father's brother Djure. Three human bodies, their feet tied to a pipe and the hands behind their backs, were suspended upside down, immersed up to the shoulders in the partially demolished cistern. Djure and his two adult sons Ante and Djure had been savagely slain. Two weeks earlier, on the night of 10 May, a similar drama had unfolded in Siro Ostojić's yard. Someone found Siro's elderly parents there, hanging from the mulberry tree in front of their house, their throats slit and their hands chopped off.

These are only two of the long list of atrocities that have dominated life in Medjugorje ever since the autumn of 1991. Since 1981, Medjugorje, situated

in the southwestern part of Bosnia-Herzegovina, has been a Marian pilgrimage centre with an international reputation. But before they knew it, the villagers found themselves caught up in a vicious process of violence. At first it was only their property they were in danger of losing, but soon it was their lives as well. In early July 1992, when the Croatian army imposed peace upon the western part of Herzegovina, local violence came to an end. But Medjugorje's *mali rat* (little war), as the villagers called it, had taken its toll.¹ Of the approximately 3,000 villagers, an estimated 140 had been killed, 60 were missing and approximately 600 had fled, and a number of buildings had been totally or partially destroyed.²

These were the sad effects of a violence process which had ravaged Medjugorje like a tornado and had resulted in an ethnic homogenization of the popular pilgrimage centre.

There is a tendency among social scientists, historians, politicians, journalists, and other Balkan specialists to interpret the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina as the result of a political policy carefully orchestrated from above and systematically carried out. Whatever eruptions of war violence might deviate from this interpretation are generally viewed as primitive Balkanism, pointless and absurd violence, the acts of bandits, organized crime, or mental aberrations (e.g. Balić 1992; Denitch 1994; Donia and Fine 1994; Malcolm 1994; Cigar 1995, 1996; Geiss and Intermann 1995; Sorabji 1995; Meštrović 1996; Sells 1996; Silber and Little 1996; West 1996). Terms of this kind reflect an uncritical acceptance of a central or national leader perspective, dismissing as deviant everything that does not go according to plan and denying or downplaying the significance of specific local and regional circumstances.

In the following pages, a violence process will be described whose final result can be seen as the ethnic homogenization of the Medjugorje community, but its dynamics cannot directly be attributed to a policy implemented from above. Rather, its course can largely be traced back to clan vendettas and local faction fighting in the context of an emerging pilgrimage regime. The case illustrates that a systematic study 'from below' is crucial to a better understanding of the dynamics and the developmental logic of processes of ethnic cleansing in this part of ex-Yugoslavia. Only then is it possible to comprehend the so-called absurdities and incongruities and transcend the dichotomy prevalent in the public debate on 'the cause of the war', i.e. a spontaneous manifestation of primitive Balkanism versus mass destruction carefully prepared and planned and carried out from above.

Historical Background: Endemic Enmity and Antagonism

'Here the knife does not go blunt and the (rifle) barrel does not rust', or so an old man concluded his historical view of the region. The recent atrocities of Medjugorje's little war did not surprise him, for they were part of a long history of warfare and revenge.

To a certain extent, the long history that the old man was referring to has to do with geo-political circumstances. Until the early decades of the 20th century, large parts of ex-Yugoslavia were virtually without interruption border regions disputed by powerful kingdoms and other political power blocs.³ For almost five hundred years, far into the nineteenth century, ex-Yugoslavia was a pawn in the power game between the Austrians and Hungarians to the northwest and the Ottomans to the southeast. Then it was torn between the Italians and Germans on the Axis side and the Russians and the Allies on the other. And after World War II, up until the end of the Cold War, the capitalist West and the communist East drove a deep wedge into Yugoslav society (cf. Alexander 1979; Jelavich 1990). These powers not only severely impeded the development of a stable state with an effective central control over the means of physical violence, they also created the conditions for the growth of nationalism and ethnic antagonism (Banać 1984; Cole 1981; A. Djilas 1985, 1991; Ramet 1985; Šimić 1991; Malcolm 1994; Denitch 1996).

In the republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, in the central part of ex-Yugoslavia, these developments can be traced with the greatest clarity. More than four hundred years of warfare between the Ottoman and the Habsburg Empire made the region an ethnic hotchpotch. Large groups of Serbs from the southeast fled to the Bosnian countryside, settling mainly in the less fertile parts of the region (Krajina). Population pressure and a sense of adventure led Croats, mainly from the bleak Dalmatian Mountains, to move southeastward. Large numbers of people eager to take advantage of any opportunity to 'get ahead' converted to Islam, thus laying the foundation for the third ethnic group, the Muslims (Koljević 1980; A. Djilas 1991; Bringa 1995; Donia and Fine 1997).⁴ During this same period, and in part as a reaction to the frequently harsh Ottoman regime, a tradition of small-scale violent resistance developed in Herzegovina: guerrilla bands of *hadjući*, *ustaši* and *četnići*.⁵ Clusters of these resistance groups made it difficult to permanently pacify the area, and their rivalry promoted acts of revenge and retaliation within and among the various villages (Jelavich 1990; Koljević 1980; Dedijer 1974; Soldo 1964; Vego 1981). Owing to their strategic position vis-à-vis the population, only Roman Catholic clergymen could temporarily curb the violence (Bax 1995).⁶

The fall of the Ottoman and Habsburg empires in 1912 and 1918 did not put an end to these forms of small-scale violence or stop people from taking the law into their own hands. On the contrary, ever since the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929) was founded in 1918, they constituted an integral component—overtly or covertly—of the interaction between the most important groups, the Serbs and the Croats (Banać 1984; Ramet 1985).

A current (though not undisputed) opinion is that Serb and Croat national consciousness goes back to the Middle Ages. At the time, each of the groups was a separate kingdom, parts of which are now disputed territory (Šimić 1991). Foreign rule put an end to their political independence, but religious beliefs (the Serbian Orthodox Church for the Serbs and Catholicism for the Croats) have always remained important identification and distinguishing factors (Ramet 1984; Rathfelder 1992; Rusinow 1982).

When the Serbs and Croats united to form one independent kingdom, these old distinctions were transformed into rapidly escalating ethnic differences that soon dominated virtually the entire political arena. Each of the parties was convinced that the other was after hegemonic control. Certainly at the beginning, the Croats had the most grounds for apprehension. The king of the empire was a Serb, the Serbs were by far the largest group, and they held almost all the important positions in the government, the bureaucracy, the army and the police force and every chance they got, they gave their fellow Serbs preferential treatment (A. Djilas 1991; Soldo n.d.). This intensified nationalist feelings, and particularly in the ethnically mixed areas, with Bosnia-Herzegovina at the top of the list, tension ran high. The Serb domination there was characterized by brutal injustice to the Croats, whose political leaders and their local representatives were removed from office and imprisoned. The Croats in turn organized armed gangs called *Ustasi*, who kidnapped Serb leaders and were not unlikely to murder them as well. Neither of the parties had much patience with traitors (Banać 1984; Jelić-Butić 1983; A. Djilas 1991; Čopić 1963; Križman 1980, 1983; Starčević 1941). Soon this ethnically mixed area, with borders sometimes running through the middle of villages, turned into a 'complex of snake pits joint together by murder, manslaughter, destruction and betrayal' (Soldo 1964).

When the tension spread to other regions and the country became ungovernable, the king disbanded the parliament and instigated a veritable reign of terror. Every trace of opposition was harshly suppressed by gangs of *Četniči*, a loosely organized auxiliary division of the national police, consisting of Serbs

who roamed through the Croat areas, robbing and plundering along the way. Their horrendous conduct, which I have described elsewhere (Bax 1993), provoked similar behaviour on the part of the Croats, particularly the Croats of South and West Herzegovina. In this inhospitable region with its coarse and truculent inhabitants, the *Ustaša* groups burgeoned.⁷ In tiny guerrilla units, they terrorized the Serb communities (Križman 1980; Jelić-Butić 1986; Tomašević 1975).

The Second World War deepened the chasm of hatred and magnified the violence to almost unprecedented proportions. With the backing of the Axis Powers, the Independent State of Croatia was founded, and Bosnia-Herzegovina was part of it. With the help of the extremely vicious and pugnacious *Ustaša* organization, the new state made every effort to cleanse Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina of all the Serb elements. The Serbs in these regions sought the help and support of the *Četnici*, who had gone underground *en masse* after the German demobilization of the Yugoslav army. Bosnia-Herzegovina turned into one huge battlefield, where guerrillas not only attacked each other, but even more so each other's towns and the civilians residing there, enormous numbers of whom they assaulted, mutilated and murdered in the most atrocious ways (Čopić 1963; Anonymous 1986; Jelić 1978; A. Djilas 1991; M. Djilas 1980).

During this period, the *Ustaša* stronghold Medjugorje lost almost half its population. The village also suffered huge material damage, for almost all the cattle were slaughtered or stolen and many of the homes were destroyed, as were the crops in the fields (Bax 1991).

A third, perhaps even more cruel party soon joined the war, the Partizans led by Tito. With his dreaded and later renowned guerrilla troops, this Communist leader was soon victorious, thanks in part to his incorporation of the *Četnici*, who were being defeated at the time. In 1943, aided by the Allies and the Russians, he founded a new Yugoslav state on Bosnian territory (Parin 1991; M. Djilas 1980, 1983).

A modern political, executive and legislative system was built up under Tito, putting a formal end to the ethnic violence and personal feuds. Brotherhood and Unity was the motto of the new order focused on total economic and social modernization along socialist lines. For years, an extremely effective system of repression enabled the authorities to present this fiction to the outside world as reality. Although there was a decline in the open hostilities, behind the communist front the old enmity and antagonism lived on undiminished.

Southwestern Herzegovina, the regional focus of this article, may have been cleansed of its numerous *Ustaši*, but their relatives were still treated as

second-class citizens. They were barred from the ruling Communist Party and thus could not obtain state benefits and civil service jobs. In all the public sectors, the Serbs in the region were in control. As ex-Partizans or their offspring, they dominated the Communist Party, the public administration, the police, the army, the bureaucracy and the numerous modern government enterprises (Vego 1981; A. Djilas 1991). In order to achieve their aims, the Serbs in the region used legal means and methods; the Croats had little choice but to resort to the old forms of self-help. In the formal, legal and political discourse, there were no Croats, there were only 'criminals', 'subversive elements' and 'reactionary forces'. In the hidden discourse of the dominated Croats, however, the opponents were referred to as *Srbi* or *Četnići*. Thus formal rules covertly contributed toward the systematic exclusion of the Croat opponent — an ethnic cleansing of a sort (M. Djilas 1977, 1983).⁸

The veneer of the 'new order' gradually began to wear thin. Driven by circumstances, in the early seventies groups of armed young men who called themselves *Ustaši* began to gather in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Their targets were government institutions, the region's numerous arms depots, party officials, and villages dominated by Serbs (Hofwiler 1992; Gelhard 1992; Soldo n.d.).⁹

In Medjugorje as well, an *Ustaša* cell assembled which, according to my informants, was incorporated in the late seventies into a regional network consisting of several thousand men. In essence this 'organized crime that has spread from the capitalist West', as the regional authorities referred to it, was a reaction to the fact that the Croats had no rights. The response was not long in coming. Particularly in the smaller towns and villages, where the presence of the official authorities was not so keenly felt, vigilantes gathered, whom their opponents referred to as *Četnići*. Groups of *Ustaši* seemed to be playing a cat and mouse game with these *Četnići*, who were sometimes assisted by the official authorities (Soldo n.d.).

Once again thunderclouds of violence began to gather in the region, but this time there was a countervailing trend of a totally different kind. Its locus was Medjugorje, a humble peasant village in a part of Herzegovina so arid and bleak that only snakes, stones and *Ustaši* could thrive there, or so the saying goes.¹⁰ In 1981, that tiny village became the centre of a Marian devotional movement focused on peace which rapidly assumed international proportions (Bax 1989, 1990, 1995).

The pacifying influence this pilgrimage centre exerted for almost a decade can be briefly summarized as follows.¹¹ The mass influx of more than

seventeen million pilgrims from all over the world imposed peace-oriented standards of conduct upon the people of the village and the entire vicinity. During this period there was a spectacular decline throughout the region in the number of registered crimes, feuds and other forms of violent self-help (see Bax 1991). The inhabitants of Medjugorje, the entire region, and indeed the regional authorities benefited from the economic boom resulting from the religious tourism.¹²

The Fall of a Pilgrimage Regime

Almost all the villagers renovated their homes to be better able to accommodate more pilgrims, enlarging their capital and taking out new loans all the while. Times were good for all of them, although of course they were better for some than for others.

The Ostojići fared by far the best, everyone agreed about that. It had once been a poor clan with very little land, most of which was barren because of its location at the foot of the Mountain of the Cross. This was why so many of the Ostojići had regularly lived and worked abroad, mainly in Germany, the United States and Canada. According to the local population, this had made them a bit *stran* (different, strange).¹³

The more signs Medjugorje showed of turning into a flourishing pilgrimage centre, the more Ostojić people returned to their native village. With the capital they earned, they soon rose to occupy a dominant position in the religious tourist industry. They built the only two 'real' hotels in the village, and in a neighbouring hamlet a large bungalow complex for pilgrims, complete with a small chapel. Most of the taxi licences were registered in their name, and at the foot of the Mountain of the Cross, the holiest shrine of all and frequented by virtually all the pilgrims, they set up a number of restaurants, outdoor cafés and souvenir shops. They had a monopoly over almost all the bread and alcohol supplied to the village, and ran the most important local branches of national travel agencies. Their influence was not limited to the immediate vicinity. At the most important arrival sites, the airports at Mostar, Split, Dubrovnik and Zagreb, Ostojići agents picked up the pilgrims in Ostojići coaches and brought them to accommodations owned by the Ostojići clan. All these facilities would not have been feasible without an extensive network of connections in the bureaucracies of the district and national government.

Of course this super-entrepreneurship gave rise to jealousy. In particular the Jerkovići and Šivrići, the oldest and most respected clans, felt humiliated by those 'stone eaters', as they called the Ostojići, whose land was indeed

strewn with stones. They themselves had the best land, and there they grew grapes and tobacco. From Vienna to Istanbul, their produce had been renowned for centuries. They looked down on the Ostojići because they were so dependent on *biro cetnići*, as they called the Serb government officials. A good Croat—and the population of Medjugorje, including the nearby hamlets, consisted of Croats—was independent and took care of business without needing any help. That was the rule they lived by, though they did on occasion have to pay a bribe or two themselves (cf. Bax 1993).

As long as everyone was able to profit from the expanding pilgrimage economy, the outbursts of jealousy remained small. But when the impending violence of war gradually cut off this lifeline, matters clearly changed. This started in the latter part of the summer of 1990. Due to terrorist activities of Serbs and Montenegrins, the southern Croatian coastal regions were unsafe and difficult to reach, which meant a sharp fall in the number of pilgrims. Croatia's declaration of independence in December that year only served to intensify this trend. And by the early spring of 1991, when Croatia and the federal troops were engaged in open warfare, most of the boarding houses in Medjugorje had barely had a paying guest for some time. Thanks to bribes and good connections, only the ones owned by the Ostojići were still partly occupied. Virtually all the villagers had gone deeply into debt, and when they were hit by hard times, they could no longer tolerate the 'inequality' of this situation. Leaders of other clans began to negotiate with the Ostojići about dividing 'what little there was'. The negotiations, it is said, did not proceed smoothly. On the contrary, a lot of old resentment surfaced, and in the end the Ostojići refused to share their favourable entreprenuring position with anyone. The story goes that the parties did not part in friendship, and in fact Medjugorje's 'little war' was already looming.

On 15 August 1991, the Feast of the Assumption of the Holy Virgin, two groups faced each other at the access road to the Mountain of the Cross. A few dozen armed and masked men kept a good three hundred pilgrims, guests of the Ostojići, from carrying out their plan to climb the Mountain of the Cross in prayer. The pilgrims – this author was among them – were ordered to leave, which they did after several warning shots were fired in the air. Later that day, accompanied by several Ostojići and a local clergyman, they made a second effort. Again it was in vain. Following the advice of the priest, the pilgrims abandoned their efforts. But this was not the end of it for the Ostojići. They felt they had been humiliated and their rights had been violated, for the mountain was free territory open to everyone. Behind the masks, they had

recognized the faces of a number of villagers, whom they then reported to the police at the district capital of Čitluk. At a police raid a few days later, several men were taken from their beds, all of them members of the Jerković clan.

The Jerkovići were quick to express their great indignation and their contempt. In Croat communities in this part of Herzegovina, it was considered cowardly to solve a conflict by summoning the police. Up to the war, the police department was an alien power apparatus, and what is more it was staffed by Serbs, the sworn enemies of the Croats (Soldo n.d.). By calling in the police, the Ostojići had proved to be friends of the enemy, 'little Serbs' as one informant put it.

A few days later, two policemen were attacked and beaten in their homes in Čitluk.¹⁴ And in the following week, in one night all thirty-two of the Ostojići's taxis were wrecked. The Čitluk police, summoned once again, did not arrive in time to catch the perpetrators; approximately forty men of the Jerković and Šivrić clans had disappeared from the village.¹⁵

Gangs and Vigilantes: The Emergence of Violence Formations

By now the war in Croatia had drastically expanded and its repercussions were increasingly felt in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Serb communities received arms from Serbia to be able to defend themselves against 'the fascist aggression of the *Ustaša*', as it was called (Glenny 1992; Silber and Little 1996; Denitch 1996). In response, the Croat inhabitants of Bosnia Herzegovina felt threatened and large numbers of them broke into the numerous local munitions and arms depots of the Territorial Defence, which was soon dismantled as a result. In no time, all of Bosnia-Herzegovina had turned into one vast constellation of heavily armed settlements (Rathfelder 1992). Side by side with these local vigilantes, small mobile-armed units developed of Serbs and Croats, who roamed the countryside independently or in larger groups, causing trouble wherever they went and burglarizing the army's numerous munitions depots. These units, often referred to as *rezervisti*, consisted of deserters from the Croatian front, men evading mobilization, members of secret paramilitary organizations of either Croats (*Ustaši*) or Serbs (*Četnići*), villagers who lost their jobs in the now defunct tourist industry and were on the lookout for loot, and lastly, as in Medjugorje, people running away from the police (Hofwiler 1992). In addition, the various sections of the former Yugoslav army, now divided along ethnic lines, also belonged to this extremely dynamic and complex configuration of attack and defence units, sometimes collaborating with each other and sometimes fiercely battling. 'Armies' of Serbs, Croats or

Muslims, who barely differed in any way from the *rezervisti* described above, operated in the various regions of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Each group tried to gain control over its own patch of the ethnic quilt.

In Medjugorje, the Ostojići feared the rapid disintegration of the official authority crumbled. These people, whose conduct, ideas and conceptions were so deviant in the region, were regularly identified with the Serb arch enemy, and were in danger of becoming the victims of a 'cleansing' (*raščistiti teren*). In this predominantly Croat area, it was not easy to defend oneself against this kind of campaign with the help of one's 'own' *rezervisti*; self-defence and the help of the police were what was needed.

In the course of September 1991, the Šivrići claimed to have observed some changes in the Ostojići hamlet at the foot of the Mountain of the Cross. Every day a small police patrol from Čitluk would come by. The police officers would inspect the streets and fields of the hamlet and then withdraw to the dining room of one of the boarding houses. The men of the Ostojići clan were rarely observed outdoors, and it seemed as if the community solely consisted of women and children. But in the darkness of the homes and late at night on the edge of the Mountain of the Cross, behind bushes and trees, attentive observers regularly noticed men with guns. Judging from their numbers, they were not just Ostojići men, and further probing revealed that some of them were men no one in the district had ever seen before. It was later concluded from the licence plates on their cars that they were Ostojići in-laws from a town across the Neretva River that was known as a non-Croat town.

On the adjacent home grounds of the Šivrići, these developments were warily observed with suspicion. It was becoming clearer and clearer that the Ostojići maintained ties with the *Četnići* and thus belonged to the enemy camp. Tension rose to a peak when one of the Šivrići boys, said to have been working on a chimney, was shot twice from the direction of the Ostojići. It gave him such a scare that he lost his balance, fell off the roof and broke his arm.

The next night explosions were heard from the direction of the churchyard, and on the following morning the Čitluk police found all the Ostojići graves blown up. The meaning of this act was immediately apparent to everyone: a denial of the rights of the Ostojići in the community and the destruction of their historical roots. In the past year, this age-old custom had been regularly revived on a large scale by Serbs and Croats in the neighbouring extremely militant Krajina region, and it was always the start of a 'cleansing' (Reissmüller 1992; Rathfelder 1992). After this act of open aggression, things quieted down. But it was a menacing kind of silence, and the Jerkovići and

Šivrići were waiting with bated breath to see how their opponent would respond.

Cleansing and Resistance

Together with men who had left and were now returning, equipped with ample arms, munitions and explosives from the depot in Čapljina, the Šivrići and Jerkovići prepared to 'settle matters once and for all' with the enemy. They made good use of know-how acquired in the army and the Territorial Defence. In Čapljina, some of them had joined the notorious Croatian *HOŠ* militia.¹⁶ Stepan Jerkovic, a former army officer from Split, became their leader and the troops were called *Stepanovci* (Stepan's men). Stepan, usually called Stjipe, was backed by six sub group leaders (*časnići*), who each had a number of men (*vojnići*) under their command.

The first thing they did was barricade the access road at the mountain pass to the plateau where Medjugorje is situated. Day and night, they would hide there and guard the road. This made it impossible for their enemy to receive sizeable reinforcements. Limited help could only arrive via the mountain paths, but there too regular patrols were on duty.

It was not only outwardly that Medjugorje began to resemble a stronghold, but inwardly as well. All the windows in the homes of both the clans were blacked out, and wherever possible the lanes were hidden from sight by lines hung with tobacco leaves, branches or straw mats. Virtually undetected by the enemy, it was thus possible to reach each other's property and gather in groups inside the walled courtyards.

The *Ostojici* were taken completely unawares by the swift transformation into what resembled a fortress. And when they too wanted to make a safe place for themselves, they found themselves in the line of fire, though none of the shots hit the mark. Some of the women and children fled to the Mountain of the Cross, where they were guarded by clansmen hidden from sight. It was only at night, protected by darkness, that they sometimes ventured to return home for their clothes and something to eat or drink. But the enemy was on guard, and responded to their every move with gunfire.

In November 1991, the *Stepanovci* launched their offensive. Their aim was to destroy the cisterns at the homes of the *Ostojici*. In only a few nights, they managed to blow up or render useless 30 of the almost 170 cisterns. Thirty families and their livestock had to fetch water elsewhere. From their hiding places, almost every day the *Stepanovci* managed to shoot a few head of cattle on the paths.

Fear was mushrooming in the Ostojići camp, for it was evident that the superior opponent was engaged in a 'cleansing'. One night early in December, there was a skirmish between several of the guards and a member of the Ostojić clan. After a fracas, the men managed to break away. It was clear to the *Stepanovići* that their opponents had gone to fetch reinforcements; therefore they intensified their guarding patrols.

To this very day, Stepan's men still do not know how their opponent managed to bring in forty men (the size of two paramilitary units) without their noticing anything. They were soon confronted with these reinforcements—relatives of the Ostojići from a village to the south that had been 'cleansed' by Serb militiamen. It was a ferocious confrontation. Firing their rifles as a diversionary measure, the Ostojići succeeded in destroying twelve of the Šivrić's cisterns. This made a large segment of the Šivrić clan vulnerable and dependent upon others.

By Christmas 1991, Medjugorje's 'little war' took a virtually inevitable turn. On the name-day of his deceased wife, Mate Jerković, one of the Jerković clan elders, went to her grave to honour her with dried flowers and wild fruit.¹⁷ Mate had trouble walking, which was why he went by mule. As he was passing the ravaged graves of the Ostojići, a bullet hit him in the thigh. The bullet was aimed at the mule and not at a person, or so the Ostojići later informed me when I spoke to them in their hiding place. But the flow of human blood had awakened the spirit of revenge.

Mutual Destruction

Blood revenge as a form of self-help is an old and still fairly widespread institution in this corner of ex-Yugoslavia (Bax 1995; A. Djilas 1991; Vego 1981). In addition to the state, it was mainly the clergy who—by way of reconciliation rituals—made every effort to attenuate this way of eliminating one's opponents. In the course of 1991, however, state power crumbled and the clergymen of Medjugorje were 'summoned back' to their monasteries in Humac and Siroki Brijeg. This left the parties to their own devices, abandoned to the dynamics of the devastating process they formed with each other. Once it had been set in motion, the process exhibited a tendency toward escalation, driven as it was by the principle of retribution.

Shortly after the start of the new year, this was demonstrated for all to see. The eldest son of Mate, the old man who had been shot on his mule, had shot one of the Ostojići clan elders in the thigh as a payback for his father's wound. But Mate fell ill and died of his wound. When this happened, his own clan's elders all agreed the retribution had to be taken one step further;

Jure Ostojić, a brother of the clan elder shot in the thigh, was now shot in the lower back and paralysed for life. His clan refused to accept this and took double revenge: two young Šivrić men were shot in the back, and died on the day of the Feast of the Epiphany (6 January). Obviously this bloodshed put the parties on guard, for since then neither of the clans, at any rate their male members, dared to show their faces much on the streets in the daytime.

Together with a good two hundred other men, most of whom were from the Jerković and Šivrić clans, the *Štepanovčići* kept the area closed off. This put the Ostojići and their relatives from outside the area, more than a hundred men in all, in a perilous position. Their ammunition and food were running out, but if they made a mass break for it, it would probably mean a massacre of their own people. Waiting longer, however, would only force them to surrender in the end and leave Medjugorje forever.

For a couple of weeks, nothing special happened; the tension rose and everyone seemed to be waiting for an explosion of violence. It came from an unexpected quarter. Late one afternoon at the end of January 1991, a few military aeroplanes from the base in Mostar flew low over Medjugorje. It later turned out that they were looking for a group of Montenegrin soldiers who had deserted in East Slavonia and were now headed home, plundering as they went (*Mostarski list*, 25 January 1992). Above Medjugorje, the planes (with Serb pilots) began to shoot at the church steeples. They missed, but they did hit a few of the homes of the Šivrići. The incident distracted attention from the dominant clans, and the Ostojići were quick to take advantage. Together with some women and children, a group of men managed to reach the pass. Once they got there, however, they met up with the guards. Fierce fighting ensued, and the unprotected Ostojići were clearly at a disadvantage. Quite a few men, women and children were killed, others managed to escape. Some guards also perished in the fighting.

Things were quiet again in Medjugorje, so quiet that a group of unsuspecting pilgrims could move about freely for several days in the Marian Peace Centre.¹⁸ At regular intervals they saw groups of people, mainly women and children, leave the village with their luggage. When asked about it, they said they were fleeing 'the war'. The pilgrims did not witness the movement in the other direction, the armed men entering the village in the dead of night and spreading out over the houses. They were the relatives of the battling clans who had come to the village from 'liberated' areas, men who were no longer needed at home because their villages had been cleansed, and who had sworn to avenge all their dead kin.¹⁹

Denouement

The exodus continued until the end of March. Growing numbers of women and children left, and Medjugorje increasingly became a stronghold of armed men.²⁰ A small incident sparked off enormous repercussions. At a courtyard of the Ostojići, a few intoxicated men were showing off their skills as marksmen by shooting tins and bottles off a wall with their little Scorpio rifles. One of them recklessly tried it with a grenade gun. The grenade exploded and blew a big hole in the wall of Ante Šivrić's stable a bit further down the street. The shot was immediately answered in kind, and mortar shells soon set two homes ablaze, killing the elderly tenants.

Hardly a day went by without each of the sides doing some damage to the other's property, especially their livestock, supply sheds and cisterns. But it was the sharply rising number of avengers inside the gates of Medjugorje that gave 'the war' another turn: personal retribution in the dead of night or at dawn with a knife and a rope. An estimated eighty people, almost sixty of whom were locals, lost their lives this way; their mutilated bodies, usually hanging from a tree or ceiling beam, bore witness to the atrocious acts.²¹

The complicated process of retribution went on until the end of May, when the denouement came just as suddenly as the start. It was linked to military developments in Bosnia-Herzegovina at large. Flanked by irregular militia, a unit of the Croatian army was on its way from Čapljina to Listica. There a Serb military unit that wanted to force a passageway through to the west was being obstructed by armed groups of *Ustaši* from the region. The Croatian troops stopped near Medjugorje for the night. When patrols found out about what was going on there, an HOS unit from Čapljina decided to go off and rescue their 'Croat friends'. It was a short surprise attack that resulted, as informants later related, in a complete 'cleansing' of the Ostojići hamlet. Well nigh a hundred people, mostly men, were captured and taken off to a ravine in the vicinity, or so the story goes, where they were shot and killed.²²

At the end of June 1992, I was able to see for myself that Medjugorje was once again accessible for pilgrims. From the coast up to approximately thirty kilometres past the pilgrimage centre, the area had been 'purged' of the 'Serb aggressor'. The area had 'the protection of the Croatian army and its allies', as pamphlets at the improvised Customs Office announced. The hustle and bustle had returned to the devotion centre. Several hundred pilgrims from Italy, Canada and the United States were being catered to by villagers, who apologized for the inconvenience and the disarray 'the war' had caused. The pilgrims were very understanding, and they were glad that 'these people could

live in freedom again' and that 'the Message of Peace had triumphed'. Once again houses were being built and repaired throughout the vicinity, but it did not seem out of the ordinary, since construction work had been a familiar sight for years. Singing resounded from the Mountain of the Cross: groups of pilgrims were praying the stations. Work was also being done on the private homes in the Ostojići hamlet—now occupied by Jerkovići and Šivrići and their relatives who had come to join them. At the cemetery of Medjugorje, concealed behind bushes and trees, part of the ground was left fallow. Only a year earlier, this had been consecrated earth, the last resting place of a clan that was part of this district. Now not a single trace of their existence was left. But somewhere out there, the people of Medjugorje knew, a hatred smouldered that would one day be sparked into flame again.

Conclusion

In the previous pages a process has been described, the final result of which can be seen as the ethnic homogenization of a local community. This process was not the result of a political-military policy implemented from above. On the other hand, it makes little sense to maintain, as might be done in social science circles, that it was the outcome of primitive Balkanism, pointless and absurd violence, or mental aberrations. On the contrary; its course could be traced back to clan vendettas and local faction fighting in the context of an emerging pilgrimage regime and under the circumstances of a crumbling state monopoly on organized violence.

The Medjugorje case illustrates that the systematic study from below is crucial to a better understanding of the dynamics and developmental logic of processes of 'ethnic cleansing' in this part of the former Yugoslavia. Indeed, it must be kept in mind that, rather than being political oppositions, in the social sciences 'from above' and 'from below' are interrelated and consequently supplementary perspectives on how people live together.

The case study of Medjugorje may also open options for a more detailed understanding of the recent war in this part of ex-Yugoslavia. It may indicate that the bloodshed did not come out of the blue, nor was it the direct result of spectres that went back half a century or so and had mysteriously come to life again. It may indicate that it constituted a temporary intensification and expansion of what is essentially an ongoing process of maintaining and reproducing extremely passionate antagonism between and sometimes even within local groups. It can then also become clear that the term 'war' (*rat*) as it is used in Bosnia-Herzegovina should not be taken to mean the

same thing as in other parts of the world. The generic term *rat* not only pertains to violent processes between regular armies at the national level, but also to more private feuds between families and clans as well as all the more flexible and temporary violent operations at intermediary levels of social integration.

The case described above also draws our attention to the fact that ethnic identities are not always as fixed as our experience in Western Europe suggests. When members of the Ostojići clan came to Medjugorje in the late 17th century, they were indicated as Serb refugees from a southern area. In the times that followed, they were converted to Roman Catholicism and later registered by the secular authorities as Croats. During the recent war, a Serb identity was forced upon them by the other, rivalling clans of Medjugorje and they were treated accordingly by the Croatian army that was passing through the area. In short, Medjugorje's problems were not ethnic in origin. Rather, they were ethnicized in the course of its development.

In his recent study on Kosovo, Ger Duijzings has convincingly argued and illustrated that ambiguous, double, and multiple ethnic identities are quite normal phenomena in this part of the Balkans. Rather than being fixed and static, these socio-cultural categorizations are changeable, flexible and manipulable; they reflect the results of conflicts, contestations and negotiations (Duijzings 1999; see also Sorabji 1993, 1995; Denitch 1994). Thus, the current notion of firmly established ethnic identities being the root-cause of the recent Balkan problems is a simplification and an inadequate representation of reality, carefully propagated by national political leaders and uncritically adopted by scientists and journalists from abroad. Here again, then, a national or central leader perspective seems to dominate in most of Western analyses of Balkan society.

There is one intriguing question that should be addressed here: Why do Western circles not have a more realistic view of the complexities of the ethnically oriented antagonism in this region of the Balkans? Why do they uncritically accept the central and national leader perspective? A partial explanation can be sought in the effective concealment strategies of the Communist regime under Tito. Every effort to draw public attention to ethno-nationalistic differences was relentlessly suppressed or depicted by the strictly censored Yugoslav state press as 'manipulation by capitalist powers', 'undermining activities on the part of subversive elements' or simply as the work of 'gangsters'. Virtually without a word of criticism, Western European intellectual and political circles accepted this version as the truth. Any critical in-

quiry into the recent past of Yugoslavia was punishable by a lengthy prison sentence (Balić 1992; Kideckel 1993; Ramet 1984). In addition to Stalinist communists (Tito's arch-enemies), the infamous political prison at Goli Otok, situated near a formerly popular tourist island in the Adriatic, was almost solely populated by historians, journalists, and authors who had shed some critical light on the former Yugoslavia's recent past (Balić 1992; Soldo n.d.).

This Western unawareness was not alleviated by any anthropological or ethnographic studies at the local level. On the contrary; in their impressive review article they wrote in 1983, Halpern and Kideckel did not mention a single publication about local-level political relations and processes, for the simple reason that there were none. The study of ethno-nationalism in Yugoslavia was taboo in anthropological circles, and that of ethnicity long remained confined to ludistic and folkloristic descriptions and analyses of the cultural content of ethnic identity (e.g. Hammel 1969; Lockwood 1972, 1975, 1978, 1981) or focused on the politically relatively innocuous inter-state level (cf. Beck & Cole 1981; Sugar 1980). Indeed, as late as 1991, in anthropological circles the phenomenon of ethnonationalism in former Yugoslavia was dismissed as 'folk ideology' and 'diaspora fanaticism' (e.g. Šimić 1991). It was not until the recent outburst of large-scale violent warfare that anthropologists focused on the region became painfully aware of their selective attention and of its consequences for their perception of the locally-based aspects of the war complex (e.g. Kideckel 1993; Halpern 1993; Šimić 1993; Denitch 1991, 1993; Hayden 1993; Despalatovic 1993; Ballinger 1994; Bowman 1994).

The famous historian and sociologist Norbert Elias repeatedly noted that social developments are characterized by a combination of regularity and randomness, explainability and pure chance. On lower levels of integration, occurrences that might be regular and explainable on a high level become erratic, unpredictable, and dependent on random circumstances and personal quirks. Ever since the Middle Ages, the processes of state formation and state development in Western Europe have exhibited regularity and structure, development in a certain direction, and can be analyzed and interpreted as such (Elias 1982; see also Wilterdink 1993). It is from this perspective, characteristic of Western Europe, that the developments in former Yugoslavia in general and in Bosnia-Herzegovina in particular are generally examined and evaluated. The case of Medjugorje shows that what might seem random and unpredictable on a higher societal level demonstrates a large extent of regularity and explainability at a local level. The conclusion seems obvious that for a better understanding of the problems in Bosnia-Herzegovina – and possi-

bly for the present problems of violence in Europe in general – attention should be more systematically devoted to processes and developments at lower levels of social integration.

Acknowledgment

This article is based on documents and fieldwork. From 1983 to 1999, every year I spent some time in the research area. Even in 1992, when Bosnia-Herzegovina was formally at war, I was able to go there. At the end of 1992, and also in later years, I spent some time in Germany with two groups of refugees from Medjugorje, segments of clans that had been arch-enemies before they fled. The data for the following account, in which fictitious names are used, have been gathered only in part via personal observation and mainly in the course of extensive talks with these groups, each of which is aware of the other's whereabouts. I would like to thank my informants in Bosnia-Herzegovina and elsewhere in Europe for their help, protection and hospitality. For their comments and suggestions, I would also like to express my gratitude to Han Belt, Karin Bijker, Ger Duijzings, Caroline Hanken, Daan Meijers, Leonard Oreč, Erika Revesz, Jan Sjaarda, Fred Spier, Sjef Vissers, F.G. Bailey, Johan Goudsblom, M. Estellie Smith, four anonymous reviewers and the editors of this periodical. Of course I alone am responsible for the contents.

Notes

1. *Mali rat* is the term used in the region for small, often local violent operations of the kind traditionally endemic to the area: complicated blood revenge, whereby sometimes whole families are killed or driven away, and surprise attacks or pillaging raids on neighbouring villages by roaming gangs of armed men or other relatively small and informal violent groups. According to my informants, *mali rat* can be a side effect of organized warfare on a larger scale, but it is not equivalent to it. The Second World War and the recent hostilities in Croatia between sections of the former federal army gave rise to numerous eruptions of local violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina. When the 'large' war broke out between the 'real' armies at Sarajevo and other cities in April 1992, it re-activated these local feuds. The small-scale local wars have become closely interwoven with the far larger ones, and they are part and parcel of each other's dynamics and *raison d'être*. *Mali rat* is related to a stage of state formation that is characteristic of this part of ex-Yugoslavia, where the monopoly over the means of organized violence is still ineffectively founded upon a central plan (cf. also Denitch 1996; Donia and Fine 1997).
2. I cannot provide anything other than rough estimations. The registration records in Čitluk were destroyed, which is generally viewed as part of a war strategy focused upon destroying the territorial claims of certain segments of the population. The parish of Medjugorje has its own records, but they are said to have been destroyed as well.
3. As to the relation between the shifting spheres of influence on the peripheries of politics and the occurrence of self-help and local formations of violence, see Boehm 1985. Cf. also Seers *et al.* 1979.
4. The Muslims do not play a role in the story to be told here.
5. Aleksa Djilas (1991) noted that these terms refer to small paramilitary groups that were first observed in the early days of Turkish rule.

6. During the recent war, the Roman Catholic clergy from the area, the Franciscan friars in particular, played a vital role in the organization and mobilization of violence formations among the rural population of western Herzegovina (cf. also Sells 1996). Later, they were also crucial in the repacification process of the region. Apparently then, the 'separation between Church and State', characteristic of most European countries of today, is still virtually absent in this part of ex-Yugoslavia (see Bax, forthcoming).
7. 'Mars must be more hospitable than western Herzegovina and it is hard to imagine anybody wanting to conquer it ...' (Glenny 1992:155).
8. It was not until the late eighties, after the decline of communism in Yugoslavia, that hesitant steps were made toward a certain extent of openness about the reign of the Partizans and the Communists. It is only with the greatest reticence that Aleksa Djilas (1991) cited the names of a few authors. Nowadays there are no longer any traces of candour among the authors in ex-Yugoslavia.
9. Until recently, Bosnia-Herzegovina was known as the republic with the greatest firearms density and the largest military arsenal of all of Yugoslavia. In addition to numerous arms and munitions plants, there were factories for tanks, various armoured vehicles, cannons, military aeroplanes and missiles, and there was hardly a village or town without its own arms and munitions depot (Wiener 1986). There were various reasons for this high concentration. After the Second World War, the Tito administration decided to transfer the military industries along the borders of Yugoslavia to safer sites further inland. With its dense forests and relatively inaccessible mountain valleys, the republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina was viewed as the appropriate spot for the federal state's military arsenal. The fact that the area was rich in coal and mineral deposits promoted the further expansion of the military industry. In response to the Russian intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968, Tito decided in 1969 to organize people's militia, making it feasible to mobilize the entire population in wartime. The Teritorialna Odbrana or t.o. (Territorial Defence) was set up, which not only served to support the regular army, but could also operate completely independently. For this purpose, in almost all the towns and villages arms and munitions depots were built, which were under the supervision of local militia and where all the adults, women as well as men, played a role. Each local community could thus function as a relatively autonomous paramilitary unit. Although designed to create a unified Yugoslav military powerhouse, the system contained the seeds for a highly complex internal 'total war' like the one that engulfed Bosnia and in part Croatia as well. More information about the Territorial Defence and its problematic relation to the regular federal army can be found in Mladenovic 1970; Ramet 1985; Hofwiler 1992; Wiener 1986; Remington 1979; Ross Johnson 1973; and Rusinow 1971.
10. Snakes feature in many of the sayings and proverbs of the region, symbolizing unreliability and unpredictability. Relations in Herzegovina were often described to me by way of the saying *Ne vjeruj zmiji ni kad bi imala sobje strane rep* (Never trust a snake, not even if it has two tails).
11. I described these changes at great length from various angles in other publications (cf. Bax 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1995).
12. In 1990 Zagreb Turist reported that 19 per cent of the total turnover in the country's tourist sector was from the devotion centre in Medjugorje.

13. Elsewhere I describe in detail the historical background of this clan and its ambiguous ethnic and socio-religious past. They came to Medjugorje as Serb refugees from a southern region in the second part of the 17th century. In the first decades of the 19th century, they were converted to Roman Catholicism, but they went on practising some ancient Serbian Orthodox rituals. And after World War II, they declared themselves in the censuses as belonging to the Croat *narod* (nation) (Bax 1995; see also Vego 1981; Quaestio 1979).
14. Mostarski list, 28 August, 1992.
15. At this moment, I was advised also to leave the village, which I did. As a result, I could not systematically observe 'in the field' how the 'little war' related to the dynamics of everyday life in Medjugorje—a subject which deserves systematic attention, as has been demonstrated in a fascinating way by Price (1992) and Povrzanović (1992). What follows is primarily based on long and frequent discussions with members of the three refugee groups in Germany, and on later observations and interviews on the spot.
16. The HOS (*Hrvatske Obrambene Snage*) is a paramilitary wing of the extremely militant and violence-oriented nationalist Party of the Right (*Hrvatska Stranka Prava*) formerly led by S. Paraga. As regards its aims and methods, this party is similar to the former *Ustaša* movement in the days of World War II. In the past, the men of the Švrič and Jerković clans had been members of a gang that covered the entire Brotnjo area and regularly attacked the (Serbian) government.
17. More information on this custom can be found in Bax 1991.
18. Inquiries among the refugees from Medjugorje in Germany revealed that the parties were not in agreement. One party claimed the relative tranquility was promoted by the arrival of a group of pilgrims. The other party maintained that a group of pilgrims took advantage of the relative tranquility in Medjugorje at the time. Further investigation made it clear that up to the end of February, a group of fanatic pilgrims from Canada led by two of their own priests was in Medjugorje for more than ten days. When I questioned him over the telephone, a priest informed me that they had not noticed any traces of warfare in Medjugorje. They found it quite understandable that there were no priests in the village, and that uniformed men had blocked their way to the Mountain of the Cross 'because of hostilities'. This information reveals something of the difference in perception between the villagers and the pilgrims.
19. They were mainly men from Croat villages that had been 'purged' of Serbs. There were also a few relatives from East Slavonia, the children or grandchildren of former *Ustaša* members who emigrated from the region. The vengeful mentality of these emigrants in their battle against Serbs in East Slavonia—who also come from Herzegovina—has been disconcertingly described by Glenny (1992). (See also Denitch 1996.)
20. It was mainly during this period that the exodus to Germany took place.
21. The mutilations followed a fixed pattern, with more and more parts of the bodies being removed. The symbolic dynamics would undoubtedly be an informative field for further research.
22. It is said to be the same ravine as where a similarly horrendous mass grave was effectuated toward the end of World War II. It is one of many historical sites where hatred lives on for the suffering that has been inflicted (cf. Bax 1993, 1995, 1997).

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